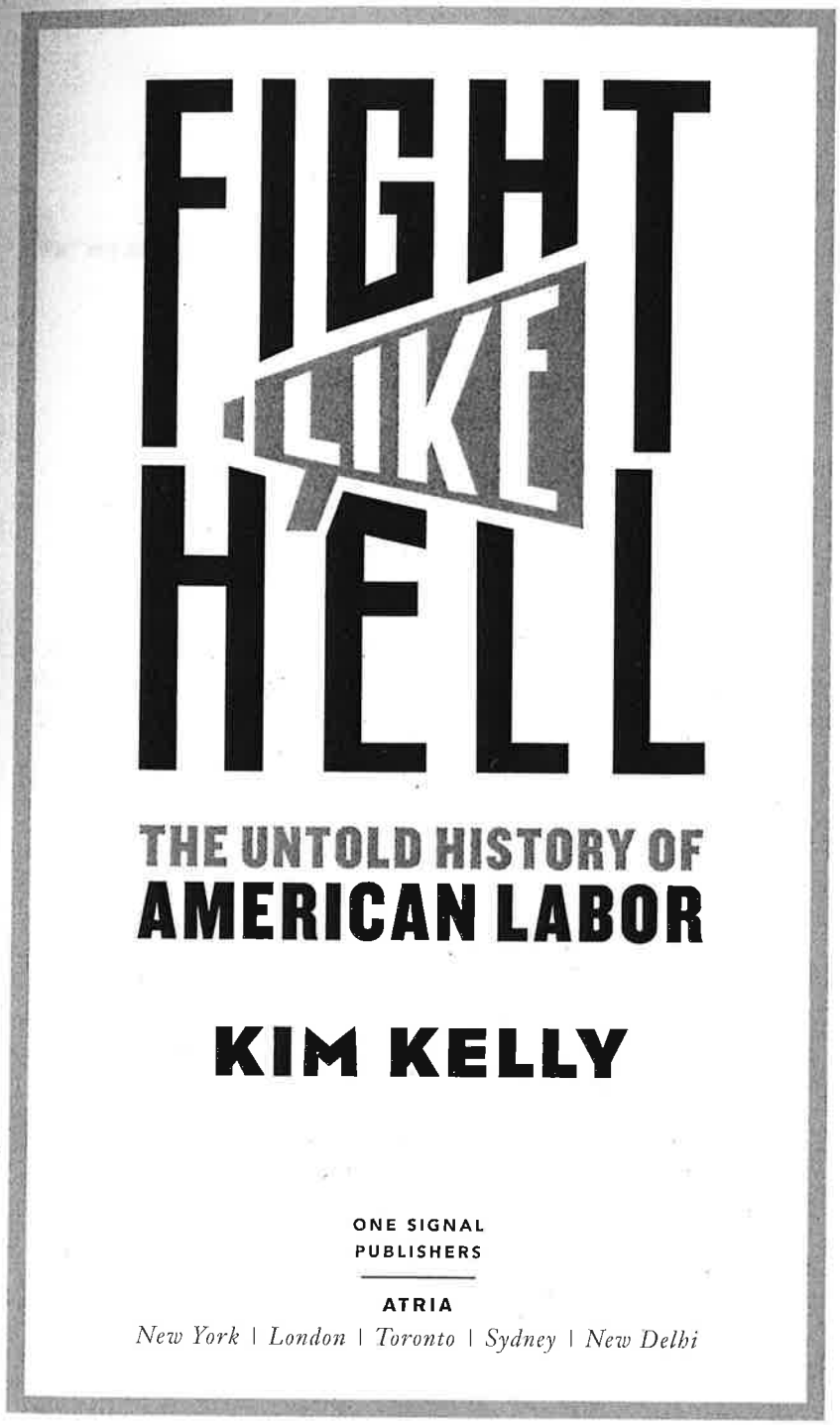

ONE SIGNAL
PUBLISHERS

ATRIA
New York | London | Toronto | Sydney | New Delhi

"*Fight Like He*
and often h
changes u
—STUART AP
WHOLESAL

Freed Bla
tion in th
immigrant
ditions for a sli
field-workers
indentured ser
workers advoc
wages. The que
America's civil
of the working
labor's relentle
tion under the

The names
represented, o
time as a privi
from the final
LGBTQIA pe
oners, and the
researched wo
and independ
that untold h
American wo
week, workp
child labor, p
ination on th
sweat, and te

Fight Like
oning in Am
Starbucks ca
workers of t
organized la
1960s. Inspi
lessons from
possible whe
it has always

An Imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

Copyright © 2022 by Kim Kelly

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. For information, address Atria Books Subsidiary Rights Department, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020.

First One Signal Publishers/Atria Books hardcover edition April 2022

ONE SIGNAL PUBLISHERS / ATRIA BOOKS and colophon are trademarks of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Simon & Schuster Special Sales at 1-866-506-1949 or business@simonandschuster.com.

The Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau can bring authors to your live event. For more information or to book an event, contact the Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau at 1-866-248-3049 or visit our website at www.simonspeakers.com.

Interior design by Silverglass

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022931666

ISBN 978-1-9821-7105-6
ISBN 978-1-9821-7107-0 (ebook)

2

THE GARMENT WORKERS

The worker must have bread, but she must have roses, too.

—Rose Schneiderman, labor activist and American Civil Liberties Union cofounder

Unless you were rich, New York City at the turn of the last century was a dreadful place to live. By the nineteenth century, its population had grown to become the nation's largest, but the city itself was hardly a gleaming metropolis. By 1910, nearly five million people called its five boroughs home, with more than two million of them squeezed onto the island of Manhattan, the heart of the nation's industry and commerce. New York City's largely immigrant workforce suffered deplorable living conditions, and workers had no safety regulations to speak of. Child labor was not only tolerated, but normalized (and even preferred in certain industries). Disease and decay were endemic in poorer neighborhoods, and workers themselves were frequently mangled or killed on the job. But the upper crust of politics and society were more than happy to leave the toiling class to their dirty, malnourished fates—as long as they didn't cause too much trouble.

Thousands of immigrant families made their home in Manhattan's Lower East Side, where creaky tenement houses teetered in

the wind and open sewers clogged the streets. Charles Dickens visited the neighborhood in 1842 and recorded his impressions of Five Points, a notoriously poor, neglected slum, in the ensuing travelogue. "This is the place—these narrow ways, diverging to the right and left, and reeking everywhere with dirt and filth," he wrote. "Such lives as are led here bear the same fruits here as elsewhere. The coarse and bloated faces at the doors have counterparts at home and all the wide world over . . . see how the rotten beams are tumbling down, and how the patched and broken windows seem to scowl dimly, like eyes that have been hurt in drunken frays."

And by the 1910s, the area had only gotten more crowded, and more dangerous. Life on the Lower East Side was brutal, but still held flashes of warmth and merriment as different cultures came together to eat, drink, laugh, and argue. A sensory riot of cooking smells, colorful fabric, and languages sang through the streets, and during their scant leisure time, workers and their families could amuse themselves in public parks and beer gardens, or take in a vaudeville show. But there was also a deep political undercurrent running through the tenements, beer halls, and cafes of the Lower East Side, long known as a hotbed of radicalism. Eastern European Jewish socialists, German communists, and Italian anarchists broke bread with American trade unionists and Irish republicans, sharing ideologies and building solidarity across language and ethnic lines. Here, amid the squalor and the shared struggles, the working classes began to dream of something better than the short, cruel lives to which they'd been consigned.

While early feminist thinkers had been advocating for women's rights since the eighteenth century, in the factories, laundries, and cramped kitchens of the Lower East Side, gender equality was a dead end. Wealthy white women, of course, did not work; their job was to maintain their stately homes and keep their rich husbands

happy. By the early twentieth century, women in the more genteel middle classes had gained a number of opportunities for respectable white-collar employment, from bookkeeping and secretarial work to teaching or working in the shops at the bottom of shiny new skyscrapers; despite the suffocating sexism that permeated society at the time, some were even able to pursue careers in law, medicine, higher education, journalism, and engineering.

However, working-class women remained tasked with a dual load of labor—first at home caring for their families, and then on the job, where they would be paid pennies on the dollar compared with men. Despite some significant improvements in 1911, when (white) women teachers were granted equal pay to their male counterparts, the wage gap remained shockingly wide until President John F. Kennedy signed the Equal Pay Act and made an initial dent in a problem that still persists today (when white women are making 82 cents to a white man's dollar, and women of color are paid far less). New York City's residents of color faced the added burden of racism, and were restricted to a handful of occupations, which for Black women almost always entailed domestic service. While some working-class white women also worked as domestics, they were more often employed by laundries and the garment-manufacturing industry. Those garment workers were contracted by factories to spend their days in makeshift sweatshops, or to take home piles of piecework, slowly destroying their bodies as they hunched over their tiny needles, and straining their eyes over sputtering candles long into the night.

Others worked long days in the garment factories themselves, which were still just as dark, dirty, and unsanitary as their nineteenth-century predecessors. Malnutrition, sleep deprivation, and disease were rampant. Some bosses, suspicious that their poorly paid women employees were stealing bits of fabric, liked to lock the factory doors in between shifts in order to protect their invest-

ments. Wages were as little as $6 per week, a precious little more than the New England "mill girls" had been paid a century earlier.

THE FIERY JEWISH GIRLS (*FARBRENTE YIDISHE MEYDLEKH*) OF NEW YORK CITY

In 1909, a coterie of young Jewish women workers at the Lower East Side's Triangle Shirtwaist Factory decided they'd had enough. Many had developed knowledge of labor unions and leftist political traditions through the Jewish Labor Bund, a prominent socialist Jewish group, and they also had allies to call upon. Rose Schneiderman, a queer Jewish feminist socialist, former garment worker, future secretary of the New York Department of Labor, and founding member of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), was already known within their industry for her work as an organizer for the New York Women's Trade Union. History knows her best for a 1912 speech in which she proclaimed, "The worker must have bread, but she must have roses, too," but that enduring turn of phrase only scratches the surface of Schneiderman's lifelong contributions to the cause of workers' rights. Another speech she gave in 1911, as the ashes of the Triangle smoldered behind her, laid bare her mission as an organizer. "Too much blood has been spilled," she said then. "I know from experience it is up to the working people to save themselves. And the only way is through a strong working-class movement."

Rose had already become a seasoned labor activist by the time she crossed paths with Triangle worker and International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) organizer Clara Lemlich. A Ukrainian immigrant and lifelong radical, Lemlich had moved to New York City in 1903 and led her coworkers at various factories out on strikes between 1906 and 1909. She, like Schneiderman and many others of her time, was one of the early U.S. labor movement's rev-

olutionary "fiery Jewish girls" who would soon leave a mark in their new homeland's history books.

In November 1909, a twenty-three-year-old Lemlich sat in on a union meeting at Cooper Union, which is now home to a private university in Manhattan's East Village but was then a tuition-free educational meeting ground for progressive youth. The meeting droned on, dominated by discussion of the relatively high-paying jobs accessible only to men, and dealing with little of personal concern to the women present in the room. The male union contingent had long written off women workers as unmanageable and unwilling to strike, and discounted whatever organizing efforts they had undertaken as unsustainable.

Lemlich, by then the veteran of a number of bloody strikes, rose to her feet and cried out, interrupting the proceedings in her native Yiddish: "I am a working girl." Her small frame and big voice immediately commanded the room's attention. "One of those who are on strike against intolerable conditions. I am tired of listening to speakers who talk in general terms. What we are here for is to decide whether we shall strike or shall not strike. I offer a resolution that a general strike be declared now."

To the amazement of the men on stage, large swaths of the crowd roared in agreement, and raised their right arms to pledge along with her in an ancient Yiddish oath: "If I turn traitor to the cause I now pledge, may my hand wither from the arm I now raise."

Over the next few weeks, between twenty and thirty thousand young women garment workers walked off their jobs, taking Lemlich's lead. The newspapers called it "the Revolt of the Girls," but it has gone down in history as "the Uprising of the 20,000." The New York Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), a reformist organization of privileged white women suffragists who had enlisted Rose Schneiderman to help foster trust between them and the working-class women

they sought to organize, took up the cause and provided financial support to the striking workers. When the action finally ended in February 1910, the WTUL had negotiated labor contracts with 339 of the Associated Waist and Dress Manufacturers' 353 firms. The deals secured stipulations over safety standards, including shorter hours, fire safety, and the proper handling of fabric scraps.

One notable holdout was the notoriously anti-union Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. The Triangle's owners, "the Shirtwaist Kings" Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, flat-out refused to agree to any of the workers' demands. Formerly garment workers themselves, they viewed the strikes as a personal attack, and saw the union as an existential threat to their high-volume business model. They initially responded to the strike by hiring police as strikebreakers to arrest and sometimes violently attack the women. While the brutality was unmistakable, this wasn't a new tactic on their part; Lemlich herself had suffered six broken ribs during earlier strikes.

Bear in mind that all this happened during a time when women were largely considered to be too fragile to live without the protection of a man, too delicate to withstand the merest hint of violence or unsavory behavior, and too empty-headed to vote or engage in politics. Yet in this case, the hired strikebreakers had no problem cracking the skulls and breaking the ribs of the working-class women on the picket lines. Local sex workers were also paid to come heckle and start physical fights with the strikers, as bosses pitted other vulnerable working-class women against one another.

Blanck and Harris never did come to the table, but the New York strikes inspired a wave of labor actions across the country, including Chicago's "Great Revolt" of sixty thousand cloak-makers in 1910, and helped lay the groundwork for industrial unionism in the garment industry. Five years after the uprising, the "needle trades" were home to some of the strongest, most militant unions in America. Back in New

York City, Lemlich and her comrades dealt with the personal frustrations of seeing their basic rights and needs ignored closest to home, but little could they have known Triangle's refusals would soon turn out to be one of the deadliest miscalculations in U.S. labor history.

"BURNING DEATH BEFORE OUR EYES"

The fire tore through the factory and its occupants swiftly, and without mercy. With the doors locked, a slow, small elevator and a narrow fire escape that clung to the side of the tall building offered the only chance to outrun the inferno. The crush of bodies trying to escape soon overwhelmed the elevator, closing off the final potential exit. There were no sprinklers, fire extinguishers, or air vents inside the factory; there were no federal safety regulations to speak of at that point, and bosses were generally left to their own devices in regards to how they treated—or mistreated—their workforces. Fabric scraps piled around the sewing machines on the factory floor provided ample fuel for the fire's ravenous hunger. It took less than thirty minutes for the building to become a roaring inferno.

No one was supposed to have been there that day. March 25, 1911, started out just like any other day inside the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, which occupied the top three floors of the ten-story Asch Building in Manhattan's Greenwich Village. The 1909 strike had secured a fifty-two-hour workweek for most workers in these kinds of establishments, but Blanck and Harris's recalcitrance meant about five hundred people were still working there that Saturday afternoon. The workers—nearly all of them women, and overwhelmingly Eastern European Jewish and Italian immigrants—toiled away amid dusty piles of fabric scraps, churning out shirtwaist after shirtwaist as the sunlight filtered in weakly through smudged windows. As usual at the Triangle, all the doors

had been locked behind the workers as they'd trickled in for their shift. Around 4:45 p.m., disaster struck.

As the fire consumed everything—and everyone—in its path, onlookers stood horrified at the sight of a dozen young women crowding onto the rickety fire escape looking desperately for an exit. The fire engines that arrived were not equipped with ladders long enough to reach the factory's windows on the ninth floor. All that could be done was to watch as the women desperately searched for a way out. And then, the bodies began to fall.

William Shepherd, a United Press reporter who had happened upon the scene, described the gruesome sight.

> Up in the [ninth] floor girls were burning to death before our very eyes. . . . Down came the bodies in a shower, burning, smoking-flaming bodies, with disheveled hair trailing upward. . . . On the sidewalk lay heaps of broken bodies. . . . I looked upon the heap of dead bodies and I remembered these girls were the shirtwaist makers. I remembered their great strike of last year in which these same girls had demanded more sanitary conditions and more safety precautions in the shops. These dead bodies were the answer.

The final toll: 146 workers dead. The panicked victims had been unable to escape the rising flames; their young bodies either lay broken on the sidewalk after they jumped to their deaths, or suffocated by the billows of smoke inside the stuffy factory. Others, some as young as fourteen, were burned alive on the factory floor. The next day, the corpses were placed in plain pine boxes and laid out in rows at the end of Manhattan's Charities Pier, colloquially known as "Misery Lane" for its enduring role as a makeshift pop-up morgue whenever a disaster struck the city. Family members and onlookers streamed

past in the tens of thousands, searching for familiar faces amid the rows of burned and mangled bodies, desperately looking for their daughters, wives, sweethearts, and sisters among the victims. Some were never identified.

Photography was still in its early days at the time, and New Yorkers reacted first with abject horror and then with outrage at the photos of the fire's victims that ran in the city's many newspapers the following day. The images of dead and dying young women, their dresses gently billowing in the wind, their long hair aflame, chilled the nation and set into motion immediate efforts to reform the industry's worst aspects. In June 1911, the New York State Legislature's newly created Factory Investigating Commission sent inspectors into the city's tenements, factories, and sweatshops; horrified by their findings, the commission passed thirty-six work-safety laws in four years.

Following weeks of public outcry, Blanck and Harris were indicted on first- and second-degree manslaughter charges following the accident. But their high-powered legal defense team saw them acquitted on all charges after the jury determined that the prosecution had not proven that the owners were aware of the locked doors prior to the fire. The fact that said owners had explicitly instructed their foremen to lock the doors each day somehow did not come up during the course of the three-week trial.

Even more ghoulishly, not only did the Triangle's owners escape any measure of accountability for the lives lost due to their own paranoid greed, but they turned a profit off of the fire. Blanck and Harris collected insurance money for the burned building, and raked in $60,000 more than the fire had cost them in damages—netting them the equivalent of $400 per victim. In 1913, the pair reached a settlement with the victims' families, paying out one week's wages for each dead worker—or roughly $6 for each lost life. Later that year, Blanck

was pulled up on charges for locking the doors at another one of his factories during work hours, just as he'd done two years previously. A separate, later incident saw him cited for allowing flammable materials to be left out on a factory floor.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory closed its doors for the final time in 1918, and its owners walked away to live out the rest of their lives in comfort. One can only hope that they saw those 146 burning bodies in their minds' eyes when they tried to go to sleep each night.

"Hundred forty-six people in a half an hour," Rose Freedman, the final remaining survivor of the fire, said in a 2000 PBS documentary, *The Living Century*. Born in Vienna, Austria, in 1893, her family emigrated to the U.S. in 1909, and after her aunt mocked her housekeeping skills, Freeman went out and got a job at the Triangle. After the fire, she went to college, got a job on a steamship line, and married. When her husband died in 1959, she lied about her age and got a job at an insurance company to support her three children, two of whom were disabled with polio. She lived a colorful, unorthodox life, and appeared at labor rallies until her death, recounting how the Triangle's factory owners had tried to bribe her to say that the doors had not been locked (she refused). She had been only seventeen when the fire broke out, and in the film she credits her survival to her decision to rush up to the executive offices on the tenth floor and follow them out onto the roof.

> I have always tears in my eyes when I think, "It should never have happened." The executives with a couple of steps could have opened the door. But they thought they were better than the working people. It's not fair because material, money, is more important here than everything. That's the biggest mistake—that a person doesn't count

much when he hasn't got money. What good is a rich man and he hasn't got a heart?

Rose died one year after the documentary aired. She was 107.

FRANCES PERKINS: LABOR ACTIVIST TURNED ARCHITECT OF THE NEW DEAL

The fire's impact rippled out far beyond the confines of the Lower East Side, thanks in part to the presence of a young suffragist named Frances Perkins. Perkins had become invested in the fight against injustice at a young age. "I had to do something about unnecessary hazards to life, unnecessary poverty," she once wrote. "It was sort of up to me." After graduating from Mount Holyoke College, she worked as a teacher and volunteered at Hull House, a settlement house founded by Jane Addams to serve poor citizens and recently arrived European immigrants. She then moved to New York City to study political science at Columbia University; there, she became involved in the women's suffrage movement, and was appointed head of the New York Consumers League, a watchdog group advocating for the rights of workers. On that fateful day in 1911, Perkins was visiting friends in Greenwich Village when news of the fire reached their drawing room. She rushed over to investigate, becoming an eyewitness to the tragedy:

> People had just begun to jump as we got there. They had been holding on until that time, standing in the windowsills, being crowded by others behind them, the fire pressing closer and closer, the smoke closer and closer. . . . The window was too crowded and they would jump and they hit the sidewalk. Every one of them was killed, everybody who jumped was killed. It was a horrifying spectacle.

Perkins later said that the fire was a "never-to-be-forgotten reminder of why I had to spend my life fighting conditions that could permit such a tragedy." She made good on her promise in more ways than one. Perkins played an instrumental role in seeking justice for the victims and enacting workplace safety reforms, first as the chief investigator of the Factory Investigating Commission, and later as an advisor to Governor Al Smith as he signed an example-setting slate of workplace safety standards into law.

Perkins quickly earned the trust of Smith's successor, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who promoted her to become New York State's industrial commissioner in 1929. And when Roosevelt departed office upon his election to U.S. President in 1932, he appointed Perkins to his presidential cabinet, making her the first woman to hold such a post. She had already made history the moment she walked into her first cabinet meeting, but Perkins was no ceremonial figurehead. Her work in the Roosevelt administration coincided with one of the most ambitiously pro-labor legislative efforts in the country's history: the New Deal.

Perkins was later quoted as saying that the New Deal began on March 25, 1911, the day she smelled the smoke and saw the bodies of those young women workers burn. She proved tireless in her drive to fight for workers' safety, was deeply involved in efforts to combat unemployment during the Great Depression, and spearheaded the creation of an ambitious social safety net program we now know as Social Security. Her fingerprints were also left on pro-worker New Deal initiatives like the 1935 National Labor Relations Act (which made it easier for many workers to join and organize unions) and the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (which established a minimum wage and prohibited child labor in many workplaces). None of these pieces of legislation were as inclusive as they should have been or went far enough to protect those who needed it most, but

they did provide crucial new protections to millions of workers where before there had been none.

Perkins's central focus was on labor, but her impact did not end there. As Adolf Hitler rose to power in late-1930s Germany, Perkins ordered her Department of Labor to aid European Jewish refugees who sought safety in the U.S. At the time, the Immigration Service was within the Department of Labor, and Perkins refused to stand down despite FDR's hesitance to relax the country's strict immigration limits. She found various legal means to bypass the challenges she encountered, and was often the lone voice standing against her colleagues' antisemitic and xenophobic attitudes. By 1937, she had arranged for the safe passage of nearly three hundred thousand temporary and permanent refugees to the United States. She was attuned to injustice at home, as well; in 1933, her first act as labor secretary was to desegregate the Department of Labor's cafeteria.

As Perkins herself once said, "Most of man's problems upon this planet, in the long history of the race, have been met and solved either partially or as a whole by experiment based on common sense and carried out with courage." The courage she exhibited undoubtedly saved countless workers' lives, and the reforms she helped carry out set the stage for another century of hard-fought battles, and hard-won progress. Perkins helped ensure that those who perished in the "horrifying spectacle" of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire would not be forgotten, and while her name is nowhere near as well known as that of the president she served alongside, the progress she made on behalf of the country's working class has changed millions of lives for the better. The woman behind the New Deal was a queer feminist, a self-proclaimed "revolutionist" who fought for what was right even when it was unpopular, and refused to back down even after her bitter male colleagues in Congress tried to impeach her in 1939 over her support for radical union leader Harry Bridges. "I

came to Washington to work for God, FDR, and the millions of forgotten, plain common workingmen," she said of her time in government. And that is exactly what she did.

"A TURNING POINT IN MY LIFE": SUE LO KEE AND THE NATIONAL DOLLAR STORES FACTORY STRIKE

Even with an ally in the White House, a garment worker's life was far from easy, and those who were immigrant women of color shouldered the heaviest burdens of all. In San Francisco, where a large community of Chinese immigrants had made their homes, the ILGWU reached out to Chinese-owned garment factories in hopes of raising industry standards (and by extension preventing them from "undercutting" their white-owned competitors, who remained the union's primary targets). "The white shops were already organized and they were clamoring that the contractors were sending work out to the Chinese workers," Chinese labor leader Sue Lo Kee later explained. "So they had to organize the Chinese." Despite its intentions, the union made little progress until it brought in organizer Jennie Maytas in 1938. As an immigrant (Maytas was born in Hungary) and a former child garment worker, she was able to connect and build trust with the Chinese women who labored in the cramped garment factories, and the workers—already fed up with their deplorable working conditions and paltry wages—voted to form the Chinese Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, Local 341.

Sue Lo Kee, a Hawai'ian-born Chinese American garment worker, became a leader in the new union, and an even more powerful force when they voted to go on strike against National Dollar Stores later that year. The chain of factories was regarded as the best employer of its kind, yet still paid its workers only $13.30 per week. The workers demanded more, but their entreaties fell on unlistening ears. "We have tried repeatedly to negotiate in good faith with our employer,

but he has consistently used the oppressive tactics of the capitalist to delay us," a Chinese ILGWU flyer explained. The resulting strike lasted three months, during which 108 workers struck and American-born Chinese and Chinese immigrant women walked the picket line together. At the time, the 105-day strike was the longest in San Francisco Chinatown's history. The workers ultimately won a new contract that included a forty-hour workweek—and a guaranteed pay raise. Not all the members were happy with it, but as Sue told them, "You have to start someplace."

The win was short-lived, as National Dollar Stores shut down the following year. But with the union's backing, Chinese workers were empowered to venture outside Chinatown's borders and break through racial barriers to find jobs in white-owned factories. Among those propelled to new opportunities? Sue Lo Kee, who later joined the ILGWU as a staff member in Local 101. "In my opinion, the strike was the best thing that ever happened," Sue told historian Judy Yung. "It changed our lives. . . . I know it was a turning point in my life."

VIVA LA HUELGA: ROSA FLORES AND THE SAN ANTONIO FARAH STRIKE

Rosa Flores never set out to become an icon. On a balmy September day in 1970, the young Chicana was just another face in a sea of workers streaming out of the Farah Manufacturing Company factory in San Antonio, Texas. But hers was the one that the news cameras happened to capture as she raised her fist and cried out, "*Viva la huelga!*"—"Long live the strike!" In the heat of the day's pro-union protest, Flores unwittingly became the face of a movement, as well as a literal poster girl. Her eye-catching image was printed on thousands of flyers and distributed around the county to rally consumers around the message "*Viva la Huelga*—Don't Buy Farah Pants!"

The boycott was launched in the midst of a contentious two-year strike that saw three thousand garment workers, 85 percent of whom were Chicanas, take on one of the largest clothing manufacturers in the U.S.—and win. Sylvia M. Trevino, the first woman to walk out that day, and Flores, who had been one of the first workers to sign a union card and display a pro-union button on the factory floor a year prior, were part of a group of tireless women workers dead set on organizing their workplace. Even though they voted overwhelmingly to unionize with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) in 1970, management refused to recognize the effort and asked the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to intervene. The resulting commotion put Flores in front of the cameras, and launched the factory into the public eye.

The NLRB finally ruled in the employer's favor nearly two years later, but by then, pro-union workers' organizing efforts had taken root throughout the factory. "I believe in fighting for our rights, and for women's rights," one striker said in Philip S. Foner's 1979 *Women and the American Labor Movement*. "I began to realize, 'Why did I put up with it all these years? Why didn't I try for something else?'"

At the beginning, many of the Farah workers were unfamiliar with unions, or worried about retaliation from the company; most of the organizing took place clandestinely, in one-on-one conversations during breaks and in the cafeteria. The concern was justified—when word leaked, management wasted no time in cracking down on workers they suspected of supporting the union, and used intimidation, threats, and retaliation as well as heavy-handed anti-union messaging to try to bust the union drive. "When we began organizing," one woman recounted to Foner, "[the company] put even harsher supervisors who tried to humiliate people more. If there was a shortage of work on a line, they made me sweep," she said. "They did it to humiliate us and to assure that no organization would succeed."

Six workers at the San Antonio factory were illegally fired for union activity on May 3, 1972, almost immediately leading five hundred of their coworkers to walk out in protest. As news spread, Farah workers in El Paso and Victoria, Texas, and Juárez, Mexico, joined as well. These workers' days had been defined by low wages, nonexistent job security, substandard medical care, and blatant sexual harassment and racism on the job. Workers who approached retirement age were fired or forced out; those who became pregnant had no hope of maternity leave. The factory environment itself was a health hazard; workers developed respiratory illnesses from the lack of ventilation, ever-increasing quotas restricted access to the bathrooms, burdening workers with kidney and bladder infections. Still others lost fingers—or eyes—to the needles on their whirring sewing machines. As one young striker said in Manuel Castaneda's 1973 film *The People vs. Willie Farah*, "They just want to work you like dogs."

During the first week of the strike, Farah management came out swinging, hiring private guards to harass the women on the picket line and menace them with unmuzzled dogs. After the company obtained an injunction to curtail picketing, 1,008 workers were cited for violations, and many were slapped with exorbitant $400 bonds (about $2,500 in today's cash), and thrown in jail overnight. Company-side violence quickly escalated. Several strikers were hit by Farah trucks, and Willie Farah's own mother ran down a striking woman with her car. As tensions flared, the ACWA filed an unfair labor practices complaint with the NLRB, and threw its institutional weight behind the strike, as well as its financial support. Weekly $30 checks from the union's coffers didn't stretch very far in a strike composed primarily of working parents, but it was better than nothing. Before long, outside donations began to pour in from the rest of the labor movement.

The idea for a nationwide boycott came soon after. It was supported by a number of major labor unions, including the Teamsters,

the United Auto Workers, and the United Farm Workers (whose own 1965–1970 boycott of Delano Grapes surely provided inspiration for the tactic) as well as the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), which had merged in 1955 and whose president, George Meany, encouraged affiliates to "Adopt a Farah Striker's Family" to gin up contributions for the cause. Meanwhile, Farah boosted its ranks with replacements and brought in Mexican workers from just across the border. Juárez, Mexico, then had a 40 percent unemployment rate that left job opportunities scarce, pushing even sympathetic workers across the picket line to join other Farah workers who had felt squeezed by intimidation and financial pressure. As one young man told the *New York Times*, "I'm working because I need the money. I have a family to support. I'm for the union and all but the way things are now with prices and everything, I've got to keep working."

The outside support was appreciated, but it was the Chicanas at the heart of the strike who kept it beating. For many of these women, the strike expanded their social and political horizons and challenged the traditional gender roles they'd long accepted as immutable; for some, those organizing meetings and pickets were the first independent activities they'd ever participated in outside of their homes and their roles as wives, daughters, and mothers. "For years I wouldn't do anything without asking my husband's permission," one Chicana striker said in Laurie Coyle, Gail Hershatter, and Emily Honig's *Women at Farah: An Unfinished Story*. "I see myself now and I think, good grief, having to ask to buy a pair of underwear! Of course, I don't do this anymore. [The time of the strike was] when it started changing. All of it. I was able to begin to stand up for myself, and I began to feel that I should be accepted for the person that I am."

As the strike stretched into its second year, that initial taste of independence became a full-fledged revolution. By 1974, even with

their armies of scabs to keep the factories running, Farah began to feel the pinch. The boycott hurt sales, slashing yearly revenue by $20 million; the company's stock was dropping; bad press over Willie Farah's incendiary racist statements about the strikers—he once dismissed them as alcoholic "Latin kids"—damaged the company's image; and by the end of 1973, four Farah locations had been closed down. Twenty-two months in, Willie Farah finally broke after the NLRB castigated his company for repeatedly violating federal labor law and abusing its workers. The resultant contract recognized the strikers' union, increased wages, offered a health and dental plan, and affirmed job security and seniority rights.

La huelga was over for now, but Farah's strikers were far from finished with fighting for *la causa*—the cause. Farah would spend the next few years trying to break the newly established union down again. "I felt that I was inferior to my supervisors, who were at the time only Anglo," one striker explained. "None of this affects me anymore. I have learned that I am an equal. I have all the rights they have. I may not have the education they have, and I may not earn the money they earn. But I am their equal regardless."

Half a century later, as the coronavirus pandemic swept the globe and demand for personal protective equipment like masks and gloves skyrocketed, some retailers took advantage of the moment to score some good PR—and rake in a few extra bucks. Opportunistic designers and Etsy hobbyists alike took advantage of mask mandates to profit off the sale of cloth masks, but as local governments started handing out contracts to factories to speed up production of masks for medical personnel and other essential workers, it was garment workers who shouldered the burden. A 2016 Department of Labor survey found that 85 percent of garment shops in Southern California that were randomly selected in the investigation failed to pay the minimum wage, and relied heavily on the practice of subcontracting.

With many of those workers living in the U.S. without documents or being paid under the table, they were left unprotected by existing labor laws. When bad bosses are given the opportunity to exploit these vulnerable populations at will, it's a recipe for disaster.

The lessons of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire should still serve as a dire warning for those who care about the well-being—as well as the survival—of the workers engaged in the garment industry. And yet in too many cases, that memory has been allowed to fade. In 2016, the UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education produced a shocking study of the industry called *Dirty Threads, Dangerous Factories: Health and Safety in Los Angeles' Fashion Industry*. Sixty percent of garment workers surveyed reported that poor ventilation, excessive heat, and dust accumulation in the factories made it difficult for them to work, and even to breathe. Rats, mice, and other vermin were common, bathrooms and common areas were kept filthy, and 82 percent of the workers reported having never received any kind of safety training. The most chilling part of the report—a revelation that comes straight out of 1911—showed that 42 percent of those surveyed reported seeing exits and doors in their shops regularly blocked.

The report also emphasizes how the industry runs on the exploitation of immigrant workers from Latin America and Asia. "This workforce, despite being vital to the fast fashion industry, is frequently subject to exploitative, unhealthy, and dangerous workplace conditions," it explains. "To fill the stores with a constant trendy clothing supply, manufacturers must contract low-wage labor not only in Asia but also in L.A."

During the pandemic, Los Angeles mayor Eric Garcetti looked to the city's bustling garment industry as a way to keep its manufacturing sector afloat, pressuring factories and sweatshops to remain open even as the virus decimated communities across L.A. This low-paid workforce, largely made up of immigrant Asian and Latina

women (many of whom were also undocumented, barring them from receiving federal relief benefits), was ushered into crowded, windowless sweatshops to manufacture clothes and masks day after day for upward of sixty hours a week. They put their own health on the line to help protect others', but few of them were given a choice either way. They, like many other low-wage workers in this country, had few if any other options. To borrow a phrase from Mark Twain, history does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme.

Today, workers like Virginia Vasquez find themselves working under conditions that would be all too familiar to those turn-of-the-century seamstresses who lost their lives to the Triangle-era garment industry. Vasquez moved to California from Guatemala in 2009 and now works as a trimmer in a Los Angeles garment factory. Like the factory girls of old, she is paid by the piece—between 10 to 12 cents per garment—and currently takes home between $250 and $280 per week for her labor. Her counterparts on the Lower East Side in the early 1900s would have recognized the conditions Vasquez and her coworkers face as they sweat in a windowless room, where rats and roaches crawl over piles of merchandise and the women are consumed with worry for their health and well-being. As Vasquez explained to me how "the heat got trapped down there," it was hard not to think of that horrible day in 1911, and about how little has really changed.

Today's garment workers are also laboring under yet another system of financial oppression: wage theft. Wage theft, a situation in which an employer refuses to pay a worker some or all of their earnings, impacts millions of workers across multiple industries. It is especially prevalent in this one, where a 2016 analysis by the U.S. Department of Labor found wage violations in 85 percent of the 77 Los Angeles garment factories it investigated. This finding directly reinforces the Garment Worker Center's 2021 claim that 85 percent of L.A.'s garment workers

experience wage theft. Workers interviewed by the *Guardian* in 2021 spoke about drawing wages as low as $6 per hour—well under the prevailing minimum wage in Los Angeles, which is the center of the country's garment production industry (California also employs the most garment workers of any state, with forty thousand in Los Angeles alone).

In 2021, the Garment Worker Protection Act (SB 62) sought to rectify the rampant wage theft in the garment industry and properly protect and compensate the workers who keep the industry running. Business interests opposed it, of course, but the workers aren't ready to give up. "With this law I will have a salary that I have never had for twenty years and I would not have to worry about wage theft," Santa Puac, a worker-organizer at the Garment Worker Center, said.

So much has changed since 1911, and yet the working class continues to be left behind, its most vulnerable communities left overworked, underpaid, and unprotected. Immigrant women of color make up the bulk of the garment industry's workforce, both in the U.S. and globally, and are forced to bear the brunt of its dangerous conditions, low pay, and high-volume output. Through decades of organizing, strikes, and knock-down, drag-out fights, they have worked to change that status quo and push back against an industry that devalues their humanity and their labor in equal measure. The century and scenes and actors may change, but the struggle remains the same: for dignity, for a living wage, for a safe workplace, for bread, and for roses, too.

As Puac said, "Every garment worker is an expert in her or his profession, and it may seem simple, but each of us has certain skills that must be respected as in all other professions. We want to be respected equally."